

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**ANOTHER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY
FOR NORTH KOREA**

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At the conclusion of the six-nation talks in Beijing last August, North Korea announced there was no reason for further negotiations and their only option was to continue their nuclear weapons development program.¹ The Beijing Summit was the first multilateral diplomatic effort aimed at heading off a nuclear crisis that became apparent in October 2002 when North Korea acknowledged restarting its nuclear program in violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework. In exchange for giving up the nuclear program, North Korea wants economic aid, diplomatic recognition, and security assurances from the US through a nonaggression treaty. The Bush administration regards these demands as “blackmail” and is unwilling to negotiate unless North Korea first dismantles its nuclear program.² Almost two months after the talks in Beijing, there continues to be a standoff between the US and North Korea that precludes meaningful negotiation. The stakes are high and now North Korea claims to have begun making bombs out of spent nuclear fuel rods.³

The Bush administration’s hard line approach is understandable given the post-9/11 atmosphere of heightened apprehension and increased efforts to keep weapons of mass destruction (WMD) out of the hands of terrorists. As understandable as the approach may be, it is not working. A prolonged stalemate gives North Korea more time to develop its nuclear capability and increases the risk the weapons will be used. The gravity of the situation demands a thoughtful reassessment of the US strategy toward North Korea within the context of long-range strategic goals for Asia. A successful strategy must consider the motivation for North Korea’s behavior and plan the next steps in a way that is most likely to elicit responses that serve US interests. The following assessment considers the national interests of each party, weighs

¹ Joseph Kahn with David E. Sanger, “North Korea Disdains More Nuclear Talks,” New York Times, 30 August 2003, 1.18.

² Sam Howe Verhovek and Barbara Demick, “Beijing Summit on North Korea Lives Up to Low Expectation” Los Angeles Times, 30 August 2003, sec. A.

³David E. Sanger, “Intelligence Puzzle: North Korean Bombs,” New York Times, 14 October 2003, A.9.

risks and options, and proposes a strategy of conditional engagement. As distasteful as it may be to deal with Kim Jong Il, the risks are too great to continue avoiding him.

*Thus, what is of supreme importance
in war is to attack the enemy's strategy.
Sun Tzu*

What Does North Korea Want?

North Korea's closed society has always posed a challenge to those looking for clues to guide the development of an effective foreign policy strategy. We know that North Korea is a highly militarized society that devotes 20-25% of its GDP to maintain the world's 5th largest military,⁴ an indication that regime security is an extremely high priority. North Korea is the "world's last remaining unreformed Stalinist state" and has survived the death of Kim Il Sung, their beloved leader of 50 years, and a three year famine that left the country on the verge of economic collapse.⁵ Much of the credit goes to the unifying power of Kim Jong Il. The "Dear Leader" is an enigma to the western world. He reportedly has a "xenophobic insistence on total national self-reliance" and his bizarre behavior has caused some to question his mental stability, while other intelligence reports suggest he possesses a brilliant and cunning mind.⁶ What is most puzzling in the current situation is that the nuclear program was initiated just as Kim Jong Il was taking unprecedented steps that seemed to indicate North Korea was finally emerging from its isolation. In the past few years, Kim Jong Il met with neighboring country leaders, sent 600 athletes to the Asian Games in South Korea, and made credible economic market reforms.⁷ The question, then, that plagues strategists is determining North Korea's intent. Three possible explanations for North Korea's reinstatement of their nuclear program can be considered.

First, North Korea's nuclear program could be a legitimate reaction to what they perceive to be a threat to their security. In the January 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush

⁴ "North Korea Country Profile 2003," The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited 2003.

⁵ "North Korea Country Profile 2003," The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited 2003.

⁶ Linda Rothstein, "Knowing/Not Knowing Mr. Kim," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 59, no. 2 (2003) 11.

⁷ James T. Laney and Jason T. Shaplen, "How to Deal with North Korea," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2003.

referred to North Korea as a member of the “axis of evil” along with Iraq and Iran. The September 2002 National Security Strategy focused on terrorism and announced the intent to use preemptive force when the US perceives a potential terrorist threat. In early 2003, the US acted on this strategy by invading Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein. Kim Jong Il may believe he is another target for regime change.

Second, North Korea could be using its nuclear program as a bargaining chip to gain desperately needed economic aid. The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in a significant loss of economic aid that was exacerbated by the famine and created a situation of desperation. Kim Jong Il’s chances of staying in power are improved if the basic needs of his constituency are met.

Third, is the possibility that Kim Jong Il’s nuclear program is part of an aggressive military strategy. North Korea’s primary goal has always been the reunification of Korea on their terms and it remains “the supreme national task.”⁸ Their offensive military capability is designed to liberate South Korea from the occupation of US imperialists and overthrow the puppet government.⁹ “Kim Jong Il’s Military Strategy for Reunification” outlines a highly provocative and detailed reunification strategy based on manipulation, deceit, and aggression.¹⁰ North Korea’s perceptions are so clouded by their reunification obsession that they even view the “sunshine policy” as South Korea’s symbolic acknowledgement of Pyongyang’s legitimacy.¹¹

It is possible that all of the hypotheses play a role in North Korea’s motivation to develop its nuclear program; however, the third hypothesis presents the most challenge. A strategy built around easing security fears or feeding the hungry is simple compared to challenging the deeply

⁸ Homer T. Hodge, “North Korea’s Military Strategy,” *Parameters* 33 iss.1 (2003): 68.

⁹ Hodge, 68.

¹⁰ Kim Myong Chol, “Kim Jong Il’s Military Strategy for Reunification,” *Comparative Strategy* 20 no.4, (Oct 2001): 303. (Although the author is a Japanese citizen with dubious links to North Korean leadership, his work has gained an audience and is remarkably detailed and seemingly authoritative.)

¹¹ Han S. Park. “North Korean Perceptions of Self and Others: Implications for Policy Choices.” *Pacific Affairs* 73, no. 4 (Winter 2000/2001): 503.

held nationalist beliefs of an isolated, well armed country. Kim Jong Il knows that South Korea's notion of reunification poses as much of a threat to his regime as current US policies. All of the resources necessary for his regime's survival are just below the 38th parallel.

*Know the enemy and know yourself.
Sun Tzu*

What Does the US Want?

US foreign policy strategy is based on the fundamental belief that an interdependent world comprised of states with democratic governments and market economies is inherently more peaceful and best serves our long term national interests for security and prosperity.¹² Zbigniew Brzezinski offers a thorough analysis of regional goals that will facilitate achieving the US global vision. The primary strategic goal for Asia is to insure the US stays involved and has an anchor in the region.¹³ To do this requires a carefully balanced relationship between the US, China, and Japan. The balance can be achieved with China emerging as a regional economic and military power and Japan maintaining its status as a global economic power. Reunifying Korea may be a long-term goal, but near-term reunification and removal of US troops from South Korea and Japan would not be in the best interest of any of the players. Greater involvement between the Koreas and China should be viewed positively, with China achieving greater regional influence in a pan-Asian alliance.¹⁴

The pivotal player is China with its remarkable economic development and growing relationships with its neighbors. The North Korean nuclear crisis threatens the evolving relationship between the US and China because it puts China in the awkward position of being the reluctant ally of its misbehaving neighbor. China's primary goal is to insure North Korea's continued existence in order to avoid being overrun with North Korean refugees if the country

¹² The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, September 2002.

¹³ Zbigniew Brzezinski, The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

¹⁴ Brzezinski, 151-193.

fails economically, or having the US on its doorstep if the South leads a successful reunification.¹⁵ In the near to mid-term, North Korea serves as a necessary buffer. China would “prefer a reconciled rather than a unified Korea in which the South could bankroll and otherwise facilitate the rejuvenation of the North without controlling the entire peninsula.”¹⁶

China poses a greater potential future threat than the dying North Korean regime, so it is critical for the US to keep the fragile relationship with China on track. The US must respect China’s concerns about North Korea in order to continue progress toward long-term strategic regional goals. The crisis can be seen as an opportunity to enhance China’s regional status by encouraging China to take a leading diplomatic role in multilateral negotiations. But the US cannot expect China to threaten or sanction North Korea and it would be unwise to put China in the position of making a veto decision at the UN Security Council.¹⁷

What is the current US strategy for North Korea?

Since the end of the Korean War, the US strategy has been one of deterring the spread of communism by containing North Korea within its boundaries with a strong US military presence in South Korea. Economic sanctions provided an extra bargaining chip that combined with deterrence were an effective strategy in meeting the US strategy goals.¹⁸

When North Korea’s nuclear ambitions became apparent in the early 1990s, the US removed its nuclear weapons from South Korea to eliminate any justification for North Korea’s program but left a significant conventional force to continue to contain through deterrence.

¹⁵ David Shambaugh, “China and the Korean Peninsula: Playing for the Long Term,” The Washington Quarterly 26.2 (2003): 43-56.

¹⁶ Andrew Scobell, “China and North Korea: The Close but Uncomfortable Relationship,” Current History, (September 2002): 282.

¹⁷ Howard M. Krawitz, “Resolving Korea’s Nuclear Crisis: Tough Choices for China,” Strategic Forum no. 201 (August 2003).

¹⁸ Paul VanVagenen, “US Economic Sanctions—Non-traditional Success Against North Korea,” Law and Policy in Internal Business 32, no. 1 (2000): 239.

Through the diplomatic efforts of former President Jimmy Carter, the US and North Korea developed the 1994 Agreed Framework which began a policy of conditional engagement.

Blame for the failure of the 1994 Agreed Framework can be placed on both sides. The light water reactor plants due for completion this year are not expected to be operational until at least 2006. North Korea hindered progress with petty bickering and the US stalled, while Japan and South Korea shouldered the financial burden.¹⁹ The US never provided the promised formal written security assurances.²⁰

North Korea's October 2002 announcement was an unwelcome distraction from the impending war with Iraq. The administration's strategy toward North Korea has been characterized by shallowness borne of avoidance. The US stated it would not be blackmailed, would not reward their behavior, would not negotiate until the nuclear program was verifiably halted, and transferred responsibility to the countries that have the most at stake.²¹ North Korea's neighbors conveyed their disapproval of the nuclear program to no avail. At the six-nation talks in August (China, South Korea, Japan, Russia, North Korea), the US continued to place responsibility on the international community hoping North Korea would respond to collective pressure. North Korea maintains that the issue is with the US and would prefer to deal directly with the US.²²

What are the risks and options?

The means with which the US pursues policy options for North Korea have some limitations and risks. A precision strike to eliminate North Korea's nuclear development

¹⁹ David C. Kang, "The Avoidable Crisis in North Korea," *Foreign Policy Research Institute* 47 no. 3 (2003): 506.

²⁰ Kang, 505.

²¹ Ralph A. Cossa, "Regional Overview: Diplomacy Fails with Iraq, Is North Korea Next?," *Pacific Forum CSIS*, April 2003, <http://www.ciaonet.org/olj/cpc/cpc_apr03a.pdf>

²² Jane Morse, "Multilateral Talks Offer North Korea Important Opportunity," Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State, August 2003 <<http://usinfo.state.gov>> (25 September 2003).

facilities has been considered. It is a tempting idea for a culture that likes quick solutions, lacks confidence in multilateral diplomatic efforts, and is increasingly annoyed with North Korea's posturing. But the risk is too high that war would erupt on the Korean peninsula and then escalate. Regime change would be too extreme, unacceptable to China, and create a nation building task the US cannot afford. Economic sanctions may not work because North Korea is accustomed to extreme hardship and may not respond. Both China and South Korea would likely provide aid that would counterbalance any sanctions the US applied to avoid unacceptable refugee problems. The only realistic option is to redesign a conditional engagement policy that has enough teeth to verifiably dismantle the nuclear program.

A conditional engagement strategy should seek to address North Korea's stated security and economic concerns while maintaining a strong military deterrence against the possibility of a North Korean invasion of South Korea. If the immediate crisis can be halted and a tense but stable equilibrium re-established, the most likely scenario for North Korea's future is gradually assimilating into the global market economy by following China's example.²³ China's power over North Korea is not one of coercion, but one of influence. They are the only country North Korea is likely to emulate and with time, US security objectives may be realized indirectly by building on the positive steps underway to strengthen ties with China.

A US Strategy for North Korea

*To subdue the enemy without
fighting is the acme of skill.
Sun Tzu*

The first and most immediate priority is to prevent North Korea from using either nuclear or conventional weapons. They have military power sufficient to invade South Korea and target Japan with ballistic missiles. North Korea's history of belligerent rhetoric suggests this is unlikely, but the threat must be taken seriously given their nationalistic desires combined with

²³ Daniel Pinkston and Phillip Saunders, "Seeing North Korea Clearly," *Survival* 45, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 85.

severe economic hardships which could result in a willingness to act out of desperation. It is possible Kim Jong Il believes time is running out.

Second, negotiate a settlement to dismantle North Korea's nuclear program with the goal of a nuclear-free Korean peninsula that leaves no means for North Korea to proliferate WMD. A verifiable agreement to eliminate their nuclear capability will come at a price, but this provides an opportunity to shape the integration of North Korea into a stable Asian region.

In the process of negotiating a conditional engagement plan with North Korea, strategic regional goals must be kept in mind. For this reason, the third priority is to facilitate the evolution of a positive relationship with China and the fourth priority is to maintain alliances with South Korea and Japan along with the US military presence.

Finally, the US should use this challenge to enhance credibility and legitimacy as the world's leader. In the prosecution of the war in Iraq, the administration created the perception of an imperialist bully wielding power unilaterally to pursue self-interests, rather than creating a better world.²⁴ US behavior must be scrupulously ethical and honest so any manipulation or deceit on the part of North Korea is clearly to their disadvantage. The US must be willing to share power with multinational partners, keep promises, and show respect for others.

The Ways to Achieve Strategic Ends

*To a surrounded enemy, you
must leave a way to escape.
Sun Tzu*

The primary concession to North Korea's demands on the US is to set up bilateral talks as a prelude to continued multilateral six-nation talks. Part of North Korea's behavior is attention seeking and the attention it craves is from the US. North Korea will not be satisfied with lower level diplomats negotiating in a multilateral setting without first being assured the US takes them seriously. The individual selected to meet directly with Kim Jong Il must be of sufficient stature

²⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The End Game," The Wall Street Journal, 23 December 2003, sec. A.

and credibility to satisfy his need for high level attention without directly engaging administration officials at this stage. Former President Bush is the ideal elder statesman to fill this role, much like Carter did in 1994. The oriental tradition of respect for elders and the dynastic parallel between the elder Bush and Kim Jong Il's father may provide a potent combination for success. In these discussions, the US should agree to provide a formal security assurance to North Korea in exchange for an immediate verifiable freeze on the nuclear program and continuation of multilateral negotiations.

Multilateral talks should begin after conferring with partners in Seoul, Beijing, Tokyo, and Moscow to develop a consistent strategy that builds on the 1994 Agreed Framework and outlines the framework to completely dismantle North Korea's nuclear program. Without appearing to abandon our current hard line approach, the US can achieve the stated ends by playing the "bad cop," while facilitating North Korea's neighbors ability to be "good cops." The US must maintain an unwavering commitment to verifiably eliminate North Korea's nuclear program without being the primary agent to deliver aid and support. We cannot demonstrate the ability to be "bought," but to achieve our overall goals for the Asian region requires North Korea get the economic aid necessary to survive, enter into a network of Asian market economies, and develop a federated relationship with South Korea that eventually may lead to reunification when conditions are more favorable. North Korea will attribute symbolic significance to negotiators' actions and so it will be most effective to have the Asian countries take the lead in designing an aid program. The US should contribute a fair share of resources, but no more. The goal of the aid package is to develop an industrial capacity so North Korea will have exportable goods and can stop its dependence on world welfare and weapons dealing. It will be necessary to continue

the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) efforts initiated by the 1994 Agreed Framework to provide the energy needed to support industry.

An engagement strategy optimistically presumes North Korea is willing and able to reform, and yet history cautions us to undertake this approach only with clear, verifiable, and enforceable conditions. Kim Jong Il is still a despicable character who is guilty of human rights atrocities, proliferating weapons technologies, and taking advantage of the generosity of others without reciprocating. Even with such a loathsome negotiating partner, a conditional engagement strategy provides the greatest chance of success with the least risk. The gradual provision of aid must be linked to clearly articulated reciprocal actions that lead to completely dismantling the nuclear program under the scrutiny of inspection teams.

The strategy also requires simultaneous diplomatic engagement with South Korea, Japan and China. The US-South Korean relationship is showing signs of strain that could jeopardize progress with North Korea. Immediate steps need to be taken to synchronize goals. The US must continue to assure Japan's security from a North Korean threat by augmenting defense capabilities as needed. Diplomatic efforts with China should encourage their economic development but postpone focusing on contentious issues such as human rights and Taiwan.

Multilateral negotiations may go on for an extended time given North Korea's style of bickering, belligerence, and grand standing. As long as negotiations continue and the WMD risk is kept low, the talks should be considered a success. It is the parallel passage of time, North Korea's continued interactions with other countries, gradual development of a market economy, and eventual change in leadership that will achieve the long term goals. The key is not to let North Korea disrupt our overall strategic regional goals for Asia. Patience is required.

Keep him under a strain and wear him down.
Sun Tzu